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ABSTRACT

The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) provided, among other measures, a new governance body for schools called "School Councils." These school-based, decision-making councils are composed of parents and teachers and headed by principals. This paper presents findings of a study that explored the effects of KERA's provision for school councils on parent involvement. Data were gathered from a survey of a nonrandom sample of 1991-92 pilot school councils (n=66). Most school councils reported that they used only two or three ways to notify parents of meetings, and only one or two methods to apprise parents of school decisions. Some schools, however, used innovative ways to encourage parent participation in the decision-making process: building parents' confidence; establishing a community-relations committee; developing a key-communicators' network; initiating an "information hotline"; providing orientation and training; posting information in local businesses; and using a telephone chain or tree. Frustrations for councils included parents' level of attendance at meetings and their tendency to focus on individual issues. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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Challenges and Successes with Including Kentucky's Parents in School-Based Decision Making: Pilot Year School Councils Respond

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PREFACE

This research was funded through a special grant from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Graduate Studies with assistance from the U.K.'s College of Education's Institute on Educational Reform and the Kentucky Department of Education, Division for School Based Decision Making. The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily represent official policy or positions of the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Graduate Studies, the University of Kentucky, the College of Education's Institute on Educational Reform, the Kentucky Department of Education, or the Division for School Based Decision Making.

ABSTRACT

Kentucky's pilot School Councils, who responded to a survey concerning inclusion of parents in decision making, noted several successes and challenges. Some Councils identified such innovative tactics for involving parents in school based decision making (SBDM) as building parents' confidence, Community Relations Committee, "Information Hotline," key communicators network, orientation and training for parents, posting information in local businesses, suggestion box, and a telephone chain. Frustrations for Councils also were surfaced including level of parent attendance at meetings and focus of parents on individual issues. Recommendations for increasing parental participation and further research are made.

BACKGROUND

The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) provided, among other measures, a new governance body for schools called School Councils. This version of school based decision making (SBDM) provides representation of parents and teachers in a decision making process for school level activities with the school principal serving as chair. Research currently being conducted at the University of Kentucky investigates the effects of KERA's provision for School Councils on parent involvement.

The following information was obtained through a nonrandom, open-ended questionnaire sent to 1991-92 pilot School Councils. Although these results are not generalizable, they are descriptive of the activities of the responding 66 School Councils, and they are suggestive of possible options for future School Councils. The 66 School Councils responded from districts representing about one-third of the 176 School Districts in Kentucky. The schools responding were 43 elementary schools, 17 high schools and 6 middle schools throughout Kentucky.

RESULTS

The results reported here focused on the inclusion of parents in the decision making process. The primary question for this phase of the study was as follows:

Do School Councils include only the required two parents in the decision making process or do they make efforts to broaden parent participation?

According to the responses, attempts to broaden participation in School Council matters have worked, but School Councils probably have not tried enough methods to insure success. For the most part, School Councils use only two or three ways to notify parents of meetings, and only one or two methods to apprise parents of School Council decisions. While some of the methods are reaching some parents, School Councils are frustrated that they may not be reaching enough parents.

Standard advertising, public relations, and marketing literature suggests that an appropriate variety of approaches with sufficient repetition should be used in communicating with various groups (Appel, 1986; Bortner, 1983; Kotler, 1967; Kotler and Fox, 1985; NSPRA, 1983; Prus, 1989). A minimum of five to seven "hits" is a marketing rule of thumb (Crane, 1965; *Communication Briefings*, no date; Park and Zaltman, 1987). The findings of a maximum of three methods for the average School Council suggested one reason Councils are frustrated about reaching parents.

Further analysis of the methods on which School Councils rely provides more insight into their frustration. School Councils cite more internal methods of notifying parents of meetings or decisions than external methods. For instance, School Councils often rely on announcements made over the public address system which occur only in the school and for which parents are rarely present or the councils send notes home with students which is a notoriously unsound method of communications (Bortner, 1983; NSPRA, 1986). Reliable external methods of communicating with parents include local newspapers, radio stations, and cable TV ads.

Some schools are using innovative means of encouraging parent participation in the decision making process. Among these methods are as follows;

- building parents' confidence
- establishing a community relations committee
- developing a key communicators network
- initiating an "information hotline"
- providing orientation and training for parents

· using a suggestion box

· posting School Council information in local businesses, and

· using a telephone chain or tree.

Specific information about each of these ideas are provided in Appendix A.

Most of the responding School Council have focused on using parents on standing or subcommittees as a way of addressing parental concerns. The use of parents on subcommittees is not required by KERA, but is an encouraging sign that Councils have attempted to address parents' issues and broaden parents' participation.

Unfortunately outside of this one approach, School Councils are not seeking input from parents. While the School Councils do provide opportunities to speak at meetings or to add items to the agenda, most of these opportunities rely on parents' initiatives. Some Councils are actively seeking parents' opinions and concerns outside of Council meetings, but most seem to expect parents to volunteer their concerns. Some of the more innovative methods of seeking parental input include surveys, a key communicators network, and a telephone chain or tree. Descriptions of these concepts are found in Appendix A.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1991-92 School Councils which responded to this study focused most of their parent participation efforts on the operation of the School Council. Parents were encouraged to attend meetings to provide input in the decision making process. Although some School Councils used innovative means of involving parents, most could improve their involvement efforts.

When notifying parents of School Council meetings or decisions, School Councils should try at least seven ways to communicate with parents, rather than their typical three or less means. These means of communication should be external to the school, not school bulletin boards or PA announcements. Some of the practical ways schools can communicate, suggested by the participating School Councils include;

· the use of local newspapers,

· radio stations,

- cable TV ads,
- school marquees,
- a key communicators network,
- posters in local businesses, and
- a school answering machine or service.

Specific ideas on communicating with parents were offered by the responding School Councils. More details are available in Appendix A or by calling Jane Clark Lindle, Ph.D., at the University of Kentucky's Department of Administration and Supervision, (606) 257-8921.

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APPENDIX A

Innovative Models

The following models were suggested by respondents to a University of Kentucky survey of 1991-92 School Councils. Follow-up interviews provided more detail about the ways these innovations were being attempted. In each of the phone interviews, participants were asked for more information about implementation and use of resources. Contact people for each of these ideas were identified. Call Jane Clark Lindle, Ph.D., University of Kentucky, Department of Administration and Supervision, (606) 257-8921, for more information.

Building Parents' Confidence

Most of the ideas offered by the elementary principal who suggested this model are, as she called them, "subtle things." The most tangible element of this model is a committee formed to promote parent involvement. This committee has increased the number of parents involved, but has primarily increased the number of volunteer hours contributed to the school. Another activity sponsored by this committee has been a weekly parent day. Every Wednesday a different homeroom in the school hosts the parent day.

But beyond these very tangible activities are a more indirect growth in awareness among teachers and parents about their relationship. The teachers and the principal in this building began with a recognition that the parents cared deeply about their children's education; yet, due to limits of the parents' education they were not confident and somewhat scared about becoming involved. The teachers and principal realized that you couldn't just say to such a parent, "Please chair this committee." Such a request would never get a positive response if the parents were timid about even entering the school building.

A number of other subtle techniques encourage parents and help them develop more confidence. Beginning with a welcoming atmosphere in the building, some of the early childhood and kindergarten teachers insist that parents enter the building to pick up their children. This allows

parents to get to know their children's teachers and to see the school regularly and informally. The primary program has allowed parents and teachers to get to know each other much better because they have more than one school year to establish a relationship --- at least two years, and sometimes three depending on the grouping of the students.

As evidence of the effects of these subtle confidence builders, the principal pointed to one of her parent representatives on the School Council.

> When her child first started, she was very shy. Because the child was in the primary program, the teacher got to work with the parent for two years. Some teachers don't realize that you have to work with parents the way you do students, but this teacher's work paid off. That parent is now a School Council representative. She is very helpful to the school, and she doesn't hesitate to work on committees now. You couldn't have asked her to do that when she first came.

Community Relations Committee

The Community, or Public, Relations Committee figured in several respondents' answers. These committees have been established as one of the standing subcommittees of the School Councils.

One of the principals who has a Community Relations Committee felt the Committee had increased community awareness of School Council activities. The Committee is still working on increasing awareness of school activities. Among the actions this principal listed for the Committee was the development of brochures and information to promote the school, memos to the staff, and regular press releases to the local media. The principal noted,

> This committee is still planning. They're trying to get a budget together to deal with mailing information or a bimonthly newsletter to parents. The things they've done this year are useful, but they're just beginning.

He added that the relationship his high school had with the press had been generally good, but that the Committee had developed further good relations. Committee members were pleased to see that most of their press releases are printed with little alteration. Coverage of general school activities is increasing, but the principal is not sure whether it is directly due to the Committee's work. He sees a lot of potential for the future of the Committee's work.

Information Hotline

The elementary school which uses this service noted that it was a direct result of School Council activities. The principal said that early in the school year, the school had installed a new phone system with voice mail. Phone codes or extensions were sent home to parents for homework, for teachers, for the principal, the PTA, and for school activities. Use of the codes requires a touch tone phone. The local phone company offered a discount for converting from a dial to a touch tone phone.

Each week, or as needed, teachers update the homework line. The PTA and the principal update the information on their lines. The principal says she can get a printout of when and how often the different lines are used. She notes that the homework line gets the most use, but that a few use her line and the PTA's. She enthusiastically endorses the use of this service, and notes that without funding and the impetus from SBDM this form of communication might not exist in her school.

Key Communicators

As the elementary principal who enthusiastically endorses this model noted, this idea has been around for a while. She learned of it through her School Council's training with Dr. Garth Petrie of Murray State University. The terminology is found in Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher's (1976) *The School and Community Relations.*

Just as Petrie and the authors recommended, this principal and her teachers identified people in her rural community who talked to a lot of other community members in their daily activities. These people or key communicators were identified for their number of contacts, not necessarily for their support of the school. The key communicators were sent notes inviting them to the school where they were asked to help the school communicate with the community. Training was provided and the key communicators are sent information about the School Council's activities on a regular basis. They then talk about these activities with their friends, neighbors, and customers. They also serve as troubleshooters for the school.

The principal reports that she now gets calls from her communicators who say, "I just thought you should know that people are saying this or wondering about..." This principal also notes;

> It's been the best thing we've done. They let us know about the rumblings in the community before things get too hot. They also pass on compliments about our school programs we might never hear.

More inservice for School Council's parent representatives

One of the principals of an elementary school who said in a telephone interview that he was very supportive of SBDM felt that his experience was not as rich as it could be due to parents' lack of experience with school issues. His suggestion was that parents receive at least 40 hours of training beyond the School Council training. These extra hours would include information about budgeting and financing of instruction and also curriculum development.

As this principal reported, most of the parents' and some of the staff's input on the School Council relied too heavily on his expertise in these areas. He questioned whether knowing more than the other Council members perhaps subverted the decision making process. Rather than getting new and better ideas from the parents and staff, this principal lamented, that they tended to rely on his perceptions and suggestions. Although he admitted that he had received some new ideas from the Council, he felt he was teaching them about his job and they deferred to his proficiency most of the time. His suggestion was that parent members should receive more than the minimum training for Council activities. He felt that they should receive direct instruction on financing and curriculum.

Orientation to School Council for all parents

The elementary principal who discussed this suggestion in a phone interview said it grew from a comment from his school's PTA president which shocked him. The PTA president came to ask permission to come to a School Council meeting. He simply wasn't sure that it was all right for him to come. The principal said, "I guess we made some assumptions about what parents know about School Councils --- even about what PTA presidents know."

As a result of this incident, the School Council and principal are using the annual Open House in the fall to explain the School Council. They plan to introduce Council members, talk about the open meetings, and give a face-to-face invitation to Council meetings. As this principal pointed out,

> We're still learning about SBDM. We need to do some things to help parents understand about School Councils and their roles. I don't think we have all the answers and it would be nice to talk to anyone interested in this idea [orientation meeting] to see how we might utilize it well.

Posters in local businesses

The simplicity of this suggestion is found in how accessible local businesses are to parents as compared to school offices or cafeteria bulletin boards. The basic idea is to place information where the parents are go such as local stores, banks, and gas stations. Employers employ parents and are willing to use their bulletin boards for information of interest to their employees. Besides making parents aware of information from the posters, the rest of the community, including the businesses that hang the posters, become more aware of the school and its activities.

Suggestion box

In one elementary school, a suggestion box is kept in the office. Parents, teachers, students or anyone else can put notes in for bettering the school. Each month the principal and the Student Council Representative go through the notes in the box deciding if each is an issue for the Student Council or if someone else must handle the issue. The principal who uses this method says the only rule is that suggestions should be signed so the appropriate people can direct their responses adequately.

Telephone chain or tree

One of the middle school principals reported that the parent representatives in his School Council use a phone chain. The chain was established by the parents. The two Council representatives would call five people who in turn would call five people. Initially, the chain was used by the Council's parent representatives to survey the general parent population for issues and

information to share with the Council. For most meetings, the Council averages about 10-12 parents and other observers. An informational session by the Council last summer drew 67 parents through the use of the phone chain.

This principal reports that the chain has proved useful in other ways besides Council issues. Reports from the chain also has helped overcome some of the pressure that middle school students place on their parents*not* to contact the school. This way, the school, however indirectly, contacts the parents and the parents can discuss a matter concerning their individual child which is relayed to the principal or an appropriate teacher. Without this chain, such matters may not have been resolved or may have escalated.